

ICPS newsletter[®]

Community councils: In the dialog between government and society, both sides are making mistakes

Efforts to strengthen the dialog between community organizations and government bodies by setting up community councils under the central and national governments is not offering positive results. The reason for this failure lies in a mistaken approach on both sides: government that wants NGOs to help it without revamping the process of adopting policies, and community organizations that want to take on some of the power of the Government instead of lobbying for the interests of different social groups. ICPS presents an initiative here that might help organize a more effective dialog between the government and civil society

During the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko, the number of community councils under ministries, VR committees, the Administration, oblast and county administrations, and local governments has grown considerably. Still, it would be hard to say that the quality of policies has improved as a result of voter participation in the drafting process. The overall effectiveness of involving voters in the policy-making process remains low and is causing disappointment on both sides.

Representatives of civic organizations see the ineffectiveness of cooperation as stemming from the lack of will on the part of the government to take voter opinions into consideration, pointing to the countless legislative, technical and organizational hurdles in the process of working together. The Government, on its part, does not perceive the efforts of NGOs as being specifically focused and complains about the disorganization of community organizations and the ineffectiveness of their work.

Obviously, the idea of democratic cooperation between a government and its society is not wrong, but the absence of practical, positive results makes it necessary to look for the underlying problems and eliminate them. To use the principles of public policy effectively in this dialog requires both sides to see their own mistakes and correct them.

The government needs to develop procedures for transparent lobbying

For government bodies to be able to work effectively with voters, the system of policy-

making needs to be overhauled. Through sheer inertia, the system inherited from soviet times continues to not be oriented on the need to include the positions of different interest groups in the process of developing and instituting policies, or to anticipate their reaction to the consequences of such policies.

The work of central and local governments in democratic countries includes obligatory analysis by stakeholder groups, determining their interests, and formulating their positions on each policy issue that is within the competence of the particular government body. The process of drafting and approving policies by government bodies anticipates points where the government must enter into a dialog with interest groups. The government needs to be informed about the positions of all stakeholders in order to better understand the reaction of different social groups and their possible actions, to study all pros and cons at the stage of debate in order to avoid being faced with opposition when the policy ready to be introduced.

When a government works in this way, the lobbying of different interests can take place in a transparent and democratic fashion. Until this kind of process becomes the official approach to developing policy, civic groups will continue to suffer from backroom deals and pressure on less influential groups from more powerful ones.

The organs of the central and governments need to establish effective institutional capacity to work in such a manner: develop guiding documents and ensure that they are followed through by taking care of

Citizen report cards: A simple tool for dialog between the government and voters

Dr. Gopakumar K. Thampi, a World Bank expert on civil society and the oversight of government bodies visited Ukraine 4–11 December 2005 as part of the “People’s Voice” project. While in Ukraine, Dr. Thampi held a workshop on organizing and carrying out public opinion polls with the help of “citizen report cards.”

Citizen report cards make it possible for government bodies to receive feedback on government services in terms of accessibility, quality, and the level of voter satisfaction with a particular service, related problems, and how to improve service delivery. They constitute a simple evaluation tool whose data can easily be generalized, evaluated and tracked for changes.

Dr. Thampi explained the essence of this concept, methods for carrying out surveys, processing primary data and presenting final results, and instruments for ensuring feedback.

These workshops were held on 6 and 8 December 2005 at the World Bank Representative Office in Ukraine and at the International Centre for Policy Studies. Participants included researchers from organizations that are partners in the “People’s Voice” project, staff from the World Bank, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, the Institute of Demography and Social Studies, the Institute of Sociology under the National Academy of Sciences, the Counterpart Creative Center, and independent community and donor organizations, top academics, and specialists from post-secondary institutions.

More information about the application of citizen report cards can be found in the internet. Information about practical examples of applying citizen report cards in India can be found online at <http://www.pacindia.org>. An online training course can also be found at <http://www.citizenreportcard.com/>.

infrastructure, financing and properly trained staff. The process of adopting policy needs to be rebuilt in such a manner that representatives of any interest group can get information about the intentions of the central or local governments and to have input into the eventual decision in the established form.

This should not mean that they have specific connections in the government or that they have to be part of a committee or collegium. In its turn, the government needs to be oriented towards dialog, to approach the discussion with concrete issues—not just to consult once a year with everyone about all issues at once—and to know how to get structured information out of this dialog that can be further used in its work.

NGOs have more powerful tools at their disposal than the government

The most common mistake that NGOs make is not to understand the purpose of their lobbying work and to see community councils as a form of access to those in power, a way to take on some of the authority of elected officials. However, this is a profoundly wrong approach, as it means that NGOs are trying to take on themselves functions that are not theirs while not carrying out their share of the work that they should be doing, based on their status in a democratic society. Civic organizations should not be looking to set up a “shadow” government or trying to acquire political power. This will do nothing to improve the work of their government.

The way such organizations should influence the policy-making process at both the national and the local levels is by consulting with interest groups, through analytical materials, disseminating policy briefs that clarify existing issues for a broader audience,

organizing political pressure campaigns, and gaining the support of the press.

Today, most community councils are working unproductively because they have not determined objectives. Since legislation on community councils merely establishes the conditions for them to operate, but does not offer concrete procedures for how to do so, most such councils work in a declarative way. They do not set for themselves the goals of tackling specific issues, preparing workable plans, or establishing criteria for evaluating their own activities—let alone their own priorities. These community councils end up creating more problems for the government bodies they work with rather than influencing the quality of these bodies’ policy work for the better.

A success story: Influencing anti-drug policy

In 2004, the All-Ukrainian Association for Harm Reduction turned to ICPS. This organizations’ purpose is to reduce the scale of the spread of HIV/AIDS among injecting drug users or IDUs. The related community council on this issue is the Community Advisory Council under the VR Committee for Health, Motherhood and Childhood.

Pooling their forces together, they organized a public awareness campaign that included an analysis of possible approaches to resolving the issue, the consequences of these approaches, and a review of the various alternatives. Between January and May 2005, a series of consultations and public hearings as to various options for dealing with this problem and how to implement these options were held with stakeholders in 10 cities. Based on the hearings and a study of current government policy, a White Paper called “Priorities in Preventing HIV/AIDS: Harm reduction strategy” was published in July and the main ideas of this paper were included in

the Concept of State Policy on Narcotics. Public hearings on the draft Concept took place in September and November with the participation of VR deputies and officials from government organizations, NGOs, and the law enforcement branch.

As a result of this public lobbying campaign, the draft Concept on government policy on narcotics that was submitted to the Verkhovna Rada reflects the opinions and positions of a wide circle of stakeholders and experts. In addition, because the media was successfully engaged in the process, it was possible to get the attention of ordinary voters and government officials to the issue and to include this issue on the agenda of relevant VR committees.

ICPS is setting up a support center for community councils

ICPS is prepared to offer support to representatives of government bodies and members of community councils and has announced the establishment of a support center on the issue of how community councils should work. There is only one requirement to get assistance from this center: to establish a single specific problem or issue towards whose resolution the specific council will work. This is the first and most important step, the one that will make it possible to further plan joint activities.

You can send your requests to the International Centre for Policy Studies by e-mail to office@icps.kiev.ua, by regular mail to vul. Pymonenka 13A, Kyiv 04050, or by fax to (380 44) 484-4402. ■

We would like to thank Mr. Yevhen Bystrytskiy, Executive Director of the Renaissance Foundation, for having proposed this idea. For additional information, you can contact the ICPS Director, Vira Naniivska by phone at (044) 484-4400 or by e-mail at vnaniivska@icps.kiev.ua.

Specialists are invited to collaborate with ICPS!

Next year, ICPS plans to set up a database of specialists that can be involved in short- and long-term projects in these areas of research:

- education and science policy;
- environmental safety;
- energy;
- European and Euro-Atlantic integration;
- fiscal policy (including financial statistics), tax policy, debt policy;
- foreign trade;
- gender issues;
- healthcare and problems related to HIV/AIDS;
- residential services;
- labor markets;

- legislation, regulation and enforcement, conformity with EU standards;
- local government;
- monetary policy;
- the real sector of the economy;
- policy analysis;
- prices;
- security and defense policy;
- social policy and reforms in the delivery of social services;
- statistics (data collection), national accounts;
- telecommunications;
- transport.

ICPS also invites professionals to collaborate in applied areas:

- building institutional capacity;
- developing NGOs;
- organizing public awareness campaigns and events;
- organizing workshops and training;
- preparing and implementing projects, developing TORs.

To be included in the ICPS expert database, send a current CV via e-mail to experts@icps.kiev.ua or by fax to (380-44) 484-4402 and indicate at least one and no more than three of the listed research areas where you could provide expert assessments and policy recommendations. We would appreciate it if you would follow the CV format posted on our site at http://www.icps.com.ua/about/exp_db.html. Candidates are required to speak Ukrainian.

icps newsletter is a weekly publication of the International Centre for Policy Studies, delivered by electronic mail.

To be included in the distribution list, contact the ICPS publications department at marketing@icps.kiev.ua or call (380-44) 484-4400.

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